

BRIEF HINTS FOR PROPOSAL WRITERS

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Writing proposals for funding is not really difficult. Your challenge is to communicate your good ideas to others.

These brief hints may help you get over some of the hurdles as you write your proposal. They are based on the most crucial elements of any proposal: determining and proving a need, writing measurable objectives, and evaluating the effectiveness of the project.

PLANNING

Any proposal for funding, whether for a single activity or a multi-faceted project, must be based on a clear plan of action. If the plan is well conceived, the proposal will be easy to write.

When planning, ask yourself:

1. What is the problem or need I wish to address?
2. What do I want to accomplish?
3. What steps must be taken, by whom, and when?
4. How much will the project cost?
5. How will I know if the project was successful?

Those questions form the outline of the proposal, and the answers supply the content. The content is composed of basic elements, usually identified as:

1. Statement of need
2. Goals and objectives
3. Activities
4. Budget
5. Evaluation plan

DETERMINING NEED

A proposal for funding must be a response to a need. Usually it is a need for change from one condition to a better condition. ***Even if the proposal does not call for you to state your needs, you must define them for yourself as the basis for creating your objectives.*** The statement of need should include a description of the problem and documentation that

the problem exists. Documentation should consist of statistical evidence or a review of the literature on the topic.

SAMPLE NEEDS STATEMENT: "A self-assessment of teacher confidence in meeting the needs of students was conducted in the district this year. While the district used multiple criteria for identifying gifted students, teachers reported that they were unsure of all the ways to measure these students' current level of achievement and, thus, were not confident they were providing the appropriate instructional programs to meet the educational needs of individual students. The district's priority of providing an appropriate education to all students was not being met. The district proposes to improve its gifted student needs assessment and instruction by sending a gifted and talented team to an intensive training institute on this topic.

As you will see later, the district's objective is not to train teachers. That is just the strategy. Their objective is to ensure gifted students' needs are being met.

WRITING MEASURABLE OBJECTIVES

Although you may have a clear idea what will happen during the project period, it may be difficult to state your objectives. The objective must indicate the outcome expected as a solution to the defined need or problem. An objective must also state your criteria for success, which simply means it states how much and what kind of change or improvement you expect the project to produce.

In the sample above, the problem is that teachers feel they are not able to determine the actual needs of gifted students in order to provide the appropriate instruction. The measurable objective would try to reverse that situation. The essential part of your measurable objective could be stated like this:

“... gifted students will receive appropriate instruction based on a determination of their academic needs...”

To be convincing you also need to show your need, your criteria for success, and your basic strategy. A well-written objective also states the method of testing or measuring the outcome.

Say, for example, your district has decided it would be reasonable to expect that 95 percent of the gifted students will receive a more appropriate education than they were currently receiving (your criteria for success). Now you must decide what you will need to do to make this change. Based on current and anticipated resources, research, best practice, policy, legal requirements and other factors, you determine a strategy to accomplish your objective. Your strategy could be intensive professional development which focuses on 1)

methods of testing for current achievement levels, 2) methods of assessment to determine academic need, and 3) teaching strategies for meeting individual student needs. Let's see if we can state the objective with what we have so far:

"A 1999 district wide teacher self-assessment revealed that gifted teachers lacked confidence that they were meeting the needs of individual gifted students. The district's objective is to make sure that at least 95 percent of identified gifted students are receiving an appropriate instruction based on a determination of their academic needs. The district's strategy for meeting this objective is for three members of the gifted and talented team to attend a highly regarded gifted education teacher training institute in order to learn 1) the best methods of testing for current achievement levels, 2) methods of assessment to determine academic need, and 3) teaching strategies for meeting individual student needs.

Measures of the success of this approach will include:

- 1. student academic advancement as measured by teacher-made tests and portfolio assessments,*
- 2. student and parent questionnaires which reveal satisfaction with adjustments to the instructional program, and*
- 3. teacher follow-up self-assessment that reveals confidence in providing appropriate instruction."*

Now you have stated your need, measurable objective, criterion for success, the strategy for accomplishing your objective, and a way to evaluate whether or not you were successful.

WHAT GOES WRONG?

A common mistake in writing an objective is to refer to an activity instead of the desired outcome.

SAMPLE POOR OBJECTIVE: The objective of this proposal is to establish a parent newsletter so that the parents of gifted students are routinely and frequently involved in their child's education.

Why is this a poor objective? Remember, objectives are specific and state the expected results in measurable terms. Although you can "measure" whether or not you established a newsletter, grantors are more interested in the extent to which parents are actually involved in their child's education, and whether or not the child's school experience is better because of that involvement. Remember, too, that the grantors look for the validity and quality of what you are doing. They may point out that sending out a newsletter, while having the potential to inform parents, is not necessarily a good vehicle to solicit their actual involvement.

Objectives should be specific, answering the questions WHO? WHAT? WHEN? and HOW MUCH?

Who will benefit from the project?
What should occur?
When will the change happen?
How much change must occur to prove the project's success?

Avoid vague and unmeasurable words in writing objectives. The following words and phrases practically guarantee objectives that will cause problems:

appreciate enjoy be aware of realize expose to

Another pitfall in writing objectives is to begin with phrases such as:

to provide	to work with
to impart to	to develop
to instill in	to enhance

If you complete each of the above phrases, you will end up not with a measurable objective, but an activity that is only a step toward your true objective. You can put the objective to the test by asking, "Why bother?" The answer to that question is probably the basis of your true objective.

By far the most common complaint about proposal objectives is that the applicant does not distinguish between what is to be accomplished (the objective) and what activities will take place (the strategies to reach the objective).

To turn the poor objective in the above sample into a true measurable objective, you might state it this way:

"Research shows that parent involvement is an important factor in a child's successful school experience. The objective of this proposal is to more closely align instruction to students' needs by increasing meaningful involvement of those students' parents. As a result of a multi-faceted district strategy of routinely and frequently involving parents in their child's instructional program, at least 50 percent of these students and their parents will report improved school experiences.

The strategy will include:

- 1. a regular newsletter to provide general information about the gifted program,*
- 2. regularly scheduled parent/teacher meetings to plan and review the student's instructional program,*
- 3. a structured process for reporting student progress and making program adjustments, and*
- 4. a plan to use parent volunteers in activities and projects.*

This approach will be deemed successful if parents and students report satisfaction with the instructional program, as measured by a student and parent questionnaire administered during the first month of the project period, and again at the end of the project period."

This objective clearly states a desired outcome. It shows what will be done, when it will be done, and how it will be measured. ***How it will be measured IS the evaluation scheme!***

EVALUATION

Ideally, a project's evaluation scheme will be built into the project design: you know in advance what you want to accomplish and what constitutes success. Well-written objectives do this for you. You are in the best position to decide how to test or measure the degree and quality of the change you anticipate. That is the essence of evaluation, whether the evaluation design is simple or complex. A proposal may have an evaluation scheme that sounds sophisticated but, because the objectives are not measurable, is meaningless.

By definition, evaluation cannot be applied after the fact. If you know the results you want, you must have some idea in the beginning how you will be able to tell if you were successful. That is why writing measurable objectives is so important. A well-written objective states the criteria for success and states the method of testing or measuring.

In assessing the effectiveness of your program, you are usually asked for your formative and summative evaluation strategy. Don't panic, and don't run off and copy someone else's important-sounding document. Certainly, you should study guides that help you determine what you should measure and how you can collect the data, but essentially it boils down to this:

FORMATIVE EVALUATION means you continually assess whether your strategy is working the way you want it to, and

SUMMATIVE EVALUATION means you look at whether, in the end, your project did what you set out to do.

SUMMARY

In summary, the grantor wants to know how effective the project is likely to be. The grantor can estimate the value of the project if:

- . it is designed to meet a need or solve a problem,
- . the technique used has a good chance of bringing about the desired change,
- . the quality and quantity of the change can be measured, and
- . the results can be documented.